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ABSTRACT

A survey of 163 special educators in North Carolina examined aspects of abuse and neglect of their students over the last 3 years. Students were mentally handicapped (MH), learning disabled (LD), or behaviorally/emotionally handicapped (BEH). Of the respondents, 43% stated that they had reported at least one case of suspected abuse or neglect during the 3-year period. Many teachers were dissatisfied with Department of Social Services investigation and feedback. Of current students, 9.5% were suspected of being neglected and 5.2% of being abused. More BEH students (24%) than MH (17%) or LD (11%) were suspected of being abused or neglected. Though only 38% of teachers had had training in abuse and neglect, 91% indicated they would like training. One third of the teachers did not know they were immune from legal prosecution for reporting suspected cases. Almost all teachers believed students should receive instruction in abuse and neglect prevention. The remainder of the paper provides a mini-course on abuse and neglect in sections on: (1) indicators of abuse and neglect, (2) reporting policies and procedures for teachers, and (3) ways that teachers can serve the needs of abused and neglected students and their families. Contains 12 references. (DB)

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The Abuse and Neglect of Exceptional Children in North Carolina

Child abuse and neglect is the "physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby" (PL 93-247).

The prevalence of abuse and neglect among the general population of children is alarming, with some estimates indicating that over 1 million children are abused and neglected each year. Over 2,000 children die each year as a result of abuse and neglect. Even these estimates may be conservative (Heward & Orlansky, 1988). Due to the private nature of abuse and neglect, most of which occurs in the child's home, many cases go unreported or unsubstantiated. In North Carolina it is estimated that 21 out of every 1,000 children are abused or neglected (The Children's Index, 1989). In 1988 over 24,000 suspected cases of abuse and neglect were reported in North Carolina; 8,307 (35%) of which were substantiated (Department of Human Resources, 1988). Some professionals believe that handicapped children represent a population of individuals who are at significant risk for abuse and neglect (Kline & Kline, 1987).

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A recent survey of special educators in North Carolina suggests that a significant number of mildly handicapped students are at risk for abuse and neglect. The results of this survey are presented in this article. In addition a discussion relating to the indicators of abuse and neglect will be provided. Finally, this article will conclude with information that may be helpful to all teachers who may find themselves in the stressful position of reporting and serving victims of abuse and neglect.

Respondents.

One hundred and sixty three special educators throughout North Carolina responded to a survey designed to gather information concerning various aspects of the abuse and neglect of their students. These teachers served 2,803 children with special needs enrolled in classes for students labeled mentally handicapped (MH), learning disabled (LD) and behaviorally/emotionally handicapped (BEH), (Table 1 provides a description of the respondents).

Insert Table 1 about here

Instrument.

The survey consisted of a series of questions designed to elicit

information from the respondents specific to the students they have served in the past three years,1985-88, and those that were being served during the 1988-89 school year. Additionally, the teachers were asked to respond to questions relating to their knowledge and opinion on legal issues of reporting, the policy for reporting in their school districts, teacher training regarding issues of abuse and neglect, and the need for student instruction on abuse and neglect.

RESULTS

These special educators were asked how many times they had reported suspected cases of abuse and neglect during their previous three years of teaching (1985-88). Of the 163 respondents 77 (43%) stated that they had reported at least one case of suspected abuse or neglect during the three year period. Many of the teachers indicated that they had reported more than once. A total of 143 cases of suspected child abuse and neglect had been reported by the 77 special educators within the three year period. The 143 reported cases consisted of 52% males, 62% were white and the average age of the students was 11.7 years at the time of the suspected abuse or neglect. Of these 143 cases 62 (43%) were substantiated by the Department of Social Services (DSS). Forty-two teachers (30%) indicated that they were satisfied with the results. Only

4 teachers (6% of the substantiated cases) testified in court.

Of the substantiated cases the most common form of abuse was physical, which included verbal abuse, assault without an implement (e.g., hand, teeth) and assault with an implement (e.g., belt, coat hanger). Neglect generally took the form of inadequate clothing, food, housing, and supervision and school absence without adequate reasons.

The special educators were then asked to indicate the number of students presently being served in their classes for the current school year,1988-89, whom they suspected of being abused or neglected. The 163 teachers stated that they served 2,803 students during the 1988-89 school year and that 411 (14.7%) of these students exhibited indicators severe enough to warrant the suspicion of abuse or neglect. Specifically, 144 (5.2%) students were suspected of being abused and 267 (9.5%) of being neglected. It is not clear if some of these 411 students may have been suspected of being both abused and neglected ; therefore, the 14.7 % figure reported here may be inflated due to some instances of duplication in reporting. It is unknown how many of these children ultimately have been or will be reported to the authorities.

It appears, not unexpectedly, that students classified as BEH represented the greatest proportion of students suspected of being abused

or neglected. Three hundred and eighty two BEH students were served by the responding teachers, 94 (24%) of whom displayed indicators of abuse or neglect. Of the 900 MH students and the 1,521 LD students 154 (17%) and 163 (11%) displayed indicators of abuse or neglect, respectively.

Only 63 (38%) of the 163 responding teachers have had any specific training in abuse and neglect; however, 129 teachers (91%) indicated that they would like to receive some training. Most of the teachers knew that their school district had a reporting policy. They were aware that they were required to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect and that they might be required to testify in court if summoned. Many of the teachers (34%), however, did not know that they were immune from legal prosecution if they reported suspected cases of abuse or neglect in good faith.

The special educators were asked if they believed their students should receive instruction in issues relating to abuse and neglect. One hundred and sixty one of the teachers (99%) stated that they would like for their students to receive instruction. Most of the teachers agreed that this instruction should include information concerning what good and bad touches are, how to stay out of dangerous situations, and what the child should do if abuse or neglect takes place.

Table 2 summarizes the data presented in this section.

Insert Table 2 about here

DISCUSSION

The special educators responding to the survey indicated that a significant number of their students had been abused or neglected in the past and many are currently at risk for being abused or neglect. The teachers indicated overwhelmingly that their students should received instruction in how to protect themselves against abuse and neglect. The instruction should be specific to the needs of the students and should be sensitive to the cognitive abilities and ages of the students. Since instruction in abuse and neglect is a controversial issue, the teacher's desire to provide in-depth instruction may be met with apprehension from the local school district since school district administrators must always balance what is taught in the schools with what will be viewed as an appropriate curricular topic by the community, specifically parents.

The majority of the reporting teachers were not satisfied with the outcome of their reporting efforts. Some teachers stated that DSS did not conduct an adequate investigation of the alleged abuse or neglect

while other teachers indicated that DSS did not provide satisfactory feedback on the cases.

Many substantiated cases do not reach the court system therefore precluding the need for teachers to testify in court (Mason, 1984). If possible DSS attempts to implement a service plan with the family in order to prevent the need for court intervention.

Although most teachers desired training, many had never received any in issues relating to abuse and neglect. Teachers of special needs students should be aware of the indicators of abuse and neglect and be familiar with the process for reporting suspected cases of abuse and neglect (Kline & Kline, 1987). Further, special educators should know how to work with abused and neglected children and their families, including the abusing member.

There is some agreement that exceptional children, specifically handicapped children, are at a significant risk for abuse and neglect (Kline & Kline, 1987). The present survey appears to support these findings. Children who have been classified as behaviorally and emotionally handicapped appear to be at the greatest risk for abuse and neglect. Children classified as mentally handicapped also were at risk for abuse and neglect. Learning Disabled children, although still at risk,

ran the least risk of abuse or neglect of the three categories examined in this survey.

This survey was limited to gathering information concerning abuse and neglect among students classified as behaviorally and emotionally handicapped, mentally handicapped or learning disabled. The literature concerning the abuse and neglect of exceptional children is scant. Hopefully this investigation will add to the data base; however, a great deal of research is needed in order to clarify the numerous issues surrounding this topic.

A MINI-COURSE ON ABUSE AND NEGLECT

The remainder of this article focuses on a) indicators of abuse and neglect, b) reporting policies and procedures for teachers, and c) ways that teachers can serve the needs of abused and neglected students and their families.

Indicators of Abuse and Neglect

Physical abuse. This refers to non-accidental physical injury to a child. Indicators include: Bruises, particularly in unusual places (e.g, on the back); burns (e.g., cigarettes, chemicals); soreness and awkward movements; noticeable bleeding from wounds or internal sources (e.g., nose, mouth); and missing hair, particularly patches of hair.

Sexual abuse. Sexual abuse means sexual involvement imposed upon a child by an adult. Indicators include: Bruises (e.g., inside of legs); bleeding from genital areas; pregnancy; infections; and unusual behaviors for the child's age (e.g., advanced sexual knowledge, masturbation, regression, poor socialization, sexual explicitness in drawings or writings, delinquency, running away).

Emotional abuse. Negative verbal statements, rejection by parents, and failure to provide a caring environment are examples of emotional abuse. Indicators include: Suicide attempts or characteristics; substance abuse; regressive behaviors (e.g., enuresis, rocking); delinquency; self-destruction; withdrawal; and unusual reaction to specific situations.

Neglect. Neglect means failure on the part of the parents to meet the basic physical, emotional and educational needs of the child. Indicators include: Wearning inappropriate clothing (e.g., too small or large, dirty, long sleeves in summer or t-shirts in winter); being overly hungry (e.g., steals or hordes food); sleeping in class; having poor hygiene; having unattended medical or dental needs; being delinquent; frequently absent from school; and having poor socialization skills.

The indicators listed above are not exhaustive; rather, they are representative of the clues to abuse and neglect. Educators should make

note of any signs of abuse and neglect. Further, teachers should not assume automatically that abuse and neglect has taken place. Children who exhibit one or even a number of these indicators are not necessarily the victims of abuse or neglect. Many children may have bruises that are sports related. Substance abuse may be evidenced by a child who comes from a concerned, loving family. There may be many explanations for these indicators that are unrelated to abuse or neglect; however, when teachers notice any of these indicators they should be prepared to document their occurrence. Teachers who are able to document sufficient evidence to warrant a reasonable suspicion of abuse or neglect should not hesitate in making a report to the appropriate source. Every state provides legal immunity from prosecution as long as suspected cases of abuse or neglect are reported in good faith; therefore, it is imperative that teachers provide well documented information which includes a listing of the indicators and when they were observed. All states require teachers to report cases of suspected abuse or neglect. Teachers who do not report suspected cases are subject to legal action. Historically, legal action has not been taken against teachers who have not reported cases of suspected abuse or neglect; however, this may no longer be the case ("Atlanta Union Protests," 1989).

Reporting Polices and Procedures

School polices. Most of the teachers in this survey indicated that their school district had a policy regarding reporting suspected cases of abuse or neglect. Newly employed and veteran teachers who are not familiar with their school district's reporting policy should obtain information about these policies.

Unfortunately not all school personnel encourage teachers to report suspected cases of abuse and neglect. In fact teachers may be encouraged not to make a report until there is no question that abuse or neglect has occurred. Teachers are then placed in the difficult position of following their administrator's request or going ahead with the report. Ultimately, teachers are responsible for reporting regardless of the request or demands of other individuals.

Procedures for Reporting. Teachers need to follow a systematic set of procedures for reporting abuse and neglect. Minimally, the following procedures should be used each time a report is made (Tower, 1987).

1. Document all relevant information, including observed indicators, dates and other important data. In some cases photographic evidence is important. Be sure to check with your school

district policy and other legal sources for the legal ramifications for taking photographs of students. If photographs are not feasible teachers may use diagrams to indicate the location of physical indicators.

2. Examine the information and try to determine if the indicators could have been caused by something other than abuse or neglect. If so, verify your doubts. If you cannot determine any reasonable cause for the indicators be sure to document this information.

3. Observe the interactions between the child and other family members. Document any conversations with family members that would help verify or eliminate your suspicions.

4. Obtain assistance from other professionals. Principals, counselors, DSS personnel, school psychologists, agencies dealing with abuse and neglect, and other teachers who have reported cases previously are all good sources of assistance.

5. Review the reporting policy of your school district.

6. Include all of the following information in your report:

a) name and address of the child and parents, b) type and extent of indicators, c) evidence of prior indicators, d) explanation of indicators, e) your name, address and phone number, f) a description

of your actions from the time you first noticed an indicator until completing the report, and g) and other relevant information.

7. Keep a record of the name, address and phone number of the individual or agency to whom you make the report.

8. Discuss what kind of support you can expect from your school administration and from other organizations (NEA, AFT).

9. Obtain report forms and other information that your school district requires.

10. Prepare for possible hostile reaction from the parents. Set up a support system consisting of other teachers and administrators. Although a report is supposed to be kept confidential by DSS, parents sometimes do find out who made the report or at least suspect who made the report. Parents may not be hostile in fact many abusive parents often become compliant when confronted with their actions (Mudry & Prewo, 1981).

Services for Student and Family

Services for the Abused Student. Teachers of abused students must be sensitive to the special needs of these students. Perhaps the primary service the special educator can provide to abused students is to be prepared with as much information as possible in order to respond in the

most appropriate and timely manner. Talking with other professionals about abuse and neglect can be an important aspect of helping abused children. Teachers are not qualified to provide medical care or to engage in extensive individual counseling; therefore, they should be able to make appropriate medical and psychological referrals.

Many abused students possess a great deal of understandable anger. Teachers must be aware of this characteristic and be ready to intervene when disruptive and unusual types of behavior occur. Providing tasks that allow them to work out some of this anger is a valuable experience. Teachers should take the time to talk to the students about the abusive situation in order to help them to respond more effectively to their own feelings. Teachers should also take time to reinforce all of the positive characteristics that the student possesses. Many abused students blame themselves for the abuse and consequently have very poor self-concepts (Tower, 1987).

Teachers can serve as role models for the students, demonstrating that stressful situation can be handled in non-abusive ways. Abused children may become abusers themselves if they only observe inappropriate ways of dealing with problems. Teachers can model alternative techniques for solving prolems (Lewark, 1983).

Without singling out the abused student teachers can take the opportunity to discuss the topic of abuse and neglect with the entire class. Not only the abused student but the whole class will benefit from systematic instruction in abuse and neglect. There are many excellent instructional programs available for use in the classroom (Tower, 1987).

Finally, teachers should be prepared to work with other professionals in the human services field and court system. Working with DSS can be a frustrating experience. Teachers must keep in mind that DSS caseworkers are often overloaded with cases and are bound by numerous regulations. Most caseworkers are caring individuals who have a very difficulty job. Teachers may believe that caseworkers are being unresponsive to them when, in fact, the caseworkers are limited in what they can discuss by their volume of cases and the legal restriction under which they must operate.

Working with the Family. Abused and neglected students come from dysfunctional families and trying to work with these families can be extremely frustrating (International Children's Centre, 1980). Non-abusing family members may be apprehensive about discussing the abuse or neglect for fear of harm to themselves or an increase of harm to the abused child. The abusing member may be resentful of your

intervention or may be very compliant. Some abusers will not admit that the abuse or neglect is taking place (denial), believe that their actions are appropriate (e.g., beating with a belt for discipline), or understand that they are responding inappropriately but do not know how else to deal with stressful situations (e.g., an abusive parent who was an abused child). How teachers work with parents will vary according to the variables of the family; however, there are several generic ways of working with parents that are appropriate regardless of the family dynamics.

First, teachers should be non-judgemental in their approach to the family, particularly the abusing individual. Although this can be a very difficult response, it is critical if teachers are to work effectively with the family. Teachers should keep in mind that they are working with a dysfunctional family and that all members of the family need assistance. If teachers display hostility or repulsion toward the family, any attempt to intervene will be less effective. Second, keep parents informed about how the student is doing in school. If the child has been removed from the home contact DSS to determine what information, if any, you are permitted to release. Make sure that the parents receive appropriate positive information about their child and restrict negative comments to

only the information the parents should have (e.g., physical problems, school difficulties directly related to abusive situation). Third, try to involve the parents in various functions at school (e.g., PTO, assemblies). Parents who feel a part of what's going on in school generally respond more favorably to their children and teachers. Focus attention on the family members and make them aware of their positive attributes. Abusive individuals have poor self-concepts and are often unable to recognize their positive characteristics. Teachers can send positive notes home for both the students and the family. Finally, be a resource to the family by talking with them about other organizations and agencies that may assist them (Morgan & Jenson, 1988). DSS generally provides this kind of assistance to families, but teachers may know of other sources. Discuss this information with the caseworker before you talk about it with the family so that you do not disrupt the service plan that DSS may have with the family.

Table 1

Description of survey respondents

Number of school districts in North Carolina	140
Number of school districts participating in survey	30
(All geographic areas and school sizes were represented)	
Number of LD/MH/BEH teachers in NC (approximate)	4,400
(LD 2,110 MH 1,640 BEH 650)	
Number of surveys sent to special educators	364
Number of special educators responding to survey	163
Number of LD/MH/BEH students served in NC	77,650*
Number of students served by responding teachers	2,803
(LD 1,521 MH 900 BEH 382)	

*June 1, 1988 headcount - NC State Department of Public Instruction)

Table 2

Summary of survey results (based on 163 respondents)

Number of suspected cases reported during period of 1985-88				143
Number of special educators making reports 1985-88				77
Number of reports substantiated by DSS				62
Number of special educators testifying in court				4
Percent of special educator satisfied with results				30%
Percent of students reported by sex	Males	52%	Females	48%
Percent of students reported by race	White	62%	Other	38%
Average age of students when report was made				11.7yrs

Number of students suspected of being abused	144
Number of students suspected of being neglected	267
Total number of students suspected of being abused/neglected	411*
(LD 163 MH 154 BEH 94)	
Percent of students suspected of being abused/neglected	14.7*
(LD 11% MH 17% BEH 24%)*	

*Some students may have been reported as being both abused and neglected; therefore, these figures may be inflated.

Number of special educators who believe they:	Yes	No	No response
are required to report suspected cases	157	4	2
are immune from legal prosecution	108	45	10
are required to testify in court if summoned	148	10	5

Number of special educators who would	Yes	No	No response
like to have training in abuse/neglect	129	13	21
Number of special educators who would like their students to have instruction	161	2	--

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